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ABSTRACT

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, a national catastrophe and the major news story of the year, was the first national labor strike in U.S. history. Because of the ideological bias of the press, specifically its implicit commitment to capitalism and to objectivity (itself a "myth" of social order), newspapers of the period could be expected to refrain from undermining the economic system in their coverage of the labor strike. An ideological approach predicts that, to delegitimize the strike, newspaper coverage would become increasingly hostile towards the trainmen as the strike develops, and then, to reincorporate dissident parties into the restored status quo, become less critical as the strike resolves. An examination of the ideas, connotative language, labeling, and stereotyping in the headlines, news stories and editorials of three prominent contemporary newspapers (the New York "Times," the Chicago "Tribune," and the Atlanta "Constitution") supports the hypothesis. The three newspapers (1) were critical of the strike from the beginning, (2) increased their anti-labor rhetoric during the violent crisis at Pittsburgh by using both news columns and editorial pages to promote status quo viewpoints and to separate "good" strikers from "bad," and (3) decreased anti-labor rhetoric as the strike waned, according it a more favorable view. However, post strike editorials continued to place the blame for the most threatening parts of the strike on communists and looters, considered the most dangerous elements of the labor force. The similarity of these findings to more recent patterns of media coverage is noted. (JG)

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History Division

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Reporting the Great Railroad Strike: How Ideology Shaped the News

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**Reporting the Great Railroad Strike:
How Ideology Shaped the News**

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The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was the first national labor strike in U.S. history. This paper examines the news-making process surrounding the strike in three prominent newspapers. The paper develops an ideological framework based on the concepts of capitalism and objectivity to predict and explain the social role of the press as it covered the strike. Following this logic, the paper hypothesizes that the greater the perceived threat of the strike, the greater the tendency of the press to delegitimize the strike.

The strike coverage consisted of three phases. In the first, when the strike was not seen as a threat, the news and editorial coverage was negative but not unduly hostile. In the second, when the violence of the strike was greatest, news stories were increasingly hostile and editorials bitter. In the third phase, as the strike lost energy, news coverage was again less inflammatory, although the editorials continued to assign blame to those groups believed responsible for the violence.

This pattern supports the ideological hypothesis and provides evidence for the assertion that the U.S. press functions in a way which delegitimizes threats to the society.

Presented to the History Division at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Convention in San Antonio, Texas, August 1987.

Reporting the Great Railroad Strike:
How Ideology Shaped the News

Introduction: The strike started on a Monday in the middle of July in Martinsburg, West Virginia, when the crew of a cattle train decided to walk off the job. By Monday evening, Martinsburg prepared for a confrontation. It came soon enough.

On Tuesday morning, a 28-year-old striker was shot by a militiaman. William P. Vandegriff died nine days later, a martyr to the cause of American labor and the first victim of the great railroad strike of 1877 (Bruce, 1959, pp. 74-79). But this was only the beginning. In the nine days between Vandegriff's wounding and his death, the railroad strike spread from one city to another in a spontaneous two-week outburst of worker frustration and violence. By the end of July, hundreds had been killed or wounded and millions of dollars in property had been destroyed.

The great railroad strike of 1877 was the first national strike in American history and it was a national catastrophe (Foner, 1984, p. 163). It was also the major national news story of the year, making headlines in every daily paper in the land. "The Reign of Mob Law" said the New York *Times* "Civil War" proclaimed the Chicago *Tribune*

This paper is concerned with the peculiar social, political and economic conditions surrounding the railroad strike of 1877. In particular, this research focuses on the role of the press in establishing and maintaining those conditions. What is the social role of the press in a crisis situation? How does the press promote or inhibit social change in times of economic hardship? These questions go to the heart of this research.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the news-making process surrounding the great railroad strike in both historical and theoretical terms. The analysis describes the type of press coverage accorded the strike. More importantly, the analysis develops an ideological approach designed to predict and explain the social role of the press in its coverage of the 1877 strike.

An Ideological Approach: This paper defines "ideology" as a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of individuals, institutions and the social system within which they operate. More specificially, ideology is used here is refer to two important concepts underlying American journalism: capitalism and a news-making process associated with American capitalism: objectivity (Kaul & McKerns, 1985). In a journalistic context, capitalism is an economic system which influences the attitudes of individual journalists. More importantly, however, capitalist ideology in journalism operates on the social system level, the press being one economic and meaning-making system within an on-going economic and social system. Objectivity, by contrast, is a professional norm within the practice of journalism which affects both individual journalists and the practice of news-making. Taken together, then, capitalism and objectivity form a powerful "ideological frame" which shapes and limits the way news is defined and reported, as this paper attempts to show.

Capitalism and objectivity are especially useful here because they lead to an examination of the fundamental but largely unstated assumptions upon which American journalism operates. Altschull (1984), for example, uses the capitalist orientation of the media to explain four "articles of faith" in American journalism:

> (1) that the press is free of outside interference, be it from the government or advertisers or even from the public; (2) that the press serves the "public's right to know"; (3) that the press seeks to learn and present the truth; and (4) that the press reports facts objectivity and fairly. (p. 114)

These four declarations, Altshcull notes, make up a mythology of the free press which is widely believed but which is largely false; the U.S. press does *not* operate independently of the political and economic power structure. In strictly economic terms, for instance, the media perform a crucial role in the capitalist system. As Altschull points out, "The economic process consists of production, distribution and consumption. In modern mass society, the news media more than any other institution facilitate the distribution of goods" (p. 123).

This understanding of capitalism's connection to the press suggests some predictions about content. That is, if the press is--and has been--a vital part of the capitalist system, then it is unlikely to encourage the destruction of that system. Labor unrest and strikes, therefore, should be opposed by capitalist news media because they are harmful to the system of production. In the context of this paper, one should be able to predict press opposition to the railroad strike of 1877 based on newspaper support for capitalism. At the social system level, it is functional for the press to delegitimize threats to the capitalist system.

But capitalist ideology is not the only force operating on the press. Objectivity also influences the shape and scope of the news. The standard of objectivity, long embraced by the press, carries with it an aura of neutrality, a nearly scientific embrace of facts. But Michael Schudson (1978), in his pioneering historical study of American news values, has shown that the rise of objectivity involved a replacement of " a

simple faith in facts with an allegiance to rules and procedures created for a world in which even the facts were in question" (p. 7). Thus, Schudson writes, facts are not "aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it" (p. 7). Following this reasoning, the ideology of objectivity limits the nature of the public debate. That is, a mainstream daily newspaper of 1877 could not argue for, say, the redistribution of wealth. Such a position would have been clearly outside the accepted limits of American political ideology. And even though objectivity was not a fully developed practice in 1877, its foundations were well in place (Schudson, p. 60).

In other words, objectivity, far from being the neutral force claimed by journalists, actually carries with it an implicit set of values. For example, objectivity allows criticism of the society but rarely if ever questions the basic values of the society. Altschull (1984) has written, "The code of objectivity and the conventions of news limit the dissent in the mass media largely to criticism of individuals. The fundamental institutions are beyond the frontiers of censure" (p. 131). Gans (1980) has also done much to advance this idea. He believes the press delegitimizes those things in American life which fall outside the mainstream:

> Obviously, the news contains many stories that are critical of domestic conditions, but these conditions are almost always treated as deviant cases, with the implication that American ideals, at least, remain viable. (p. 42)

There is, then, an ideological frame which prescribes the nature of the political and economic debate in this nation. Some ideas are outside the frame and simply are not open for serious discussion. Applying this logic to the strike coverage of 1877, one can predict some press criticism of

the economic system. But there will be no serious, full-scale attacks on the American political or economic system because such attacks could undermine or threaten the system.

Finally, the ideological frame advanced here recognizes an important connection between capitalism and objectivity. Kaul and McKerns (1985) have recently made this connection, arguing that the economic arrangements of the media have effects on the "official" ideology of journalism. The development of objectivity, they assert, was one effect of competition in the U.S. press system. Altschull also developed the connection between capitalism and objectivity. He noted, for example, that objectivity serves capitalism by helping to maintain the social order. Thus, "any group that threatens the social order or politico-economic system is rejected" (p. 133). As far as the railroad strike is concerned, then, the conventions of objectivity would predict a superficial discussion of the strikers and their demands. The function of such a discussion, according to this view, would be one of co-optation. In other words, some news coverage is desirable because it permits the strikers to believe they have influence. Yet the political system remains the same. In this way, Altschull has written, "the mass media serve as significant instruments of social control, operating as agents of the system itself" (p. 133).

Hypotheses: The general hypothesis of this research is that newspaper coverage of the two weeks of the 1877 railroad strike will become more hostile as the strike is perceived as a greater threat to the social order. In other words, the more threatening the strike is perceived, the greater the tendency of the press to delegitimize the strike.

Without any knowledge of the strike coverage, then, one can use the ideological approach to predict three stages of strike news and editorials. The first of these might be called "rising action." This would involve the

early days of the strike when its consequences are still unfolding. The capitalist bias of the press suggests negative coverage at this stage, but coverage which is more accommodating and less hostile than coverage which will follow. Stage two represents the "climax" of the dramatic action. It should begin when the strike is perceived by the press as a significant threat to the social order. Following the logic developed above, the social role of the press during this crisis period will be to delegitimize the strike. Press criticism should be harsh and consistent. Finally, there should be a third stage which might be called "falling action." In it, press coverage will remain negative but will be somewhat less negative than in stage two. Since the significant threat of the strike has been removed and the consequences of the strike are now clear, this approach would also suggest some positive news coverage of the strike. Positive news at this stage would assist in the restoration of the status quo by reaching out to dissident parties and reincorporating them into the (unchanged) social system.

The following analysis attempts to test this three-stage news prediction against the actual coverage of the 1877 strike. In addition, the analysis will specify and discuss some of the values underlying the news. Finally, the paper will draw some conclusions about these values and their meaning in the American experience.

Method: The methodology employed here is sociological and qualitative. In this paper, then, the language of stories and headlines will be analyzed within the ideological framework outline above. Particular attention will be paid to the connotation of particular words and phrases. That is, the positive, negative or neutral meanings of words and phrases will be qualitatively evaluated and measured against the hypothesis above. Also of interest here will be evidence of labeling and stereotyping, linguistic

methods of delegitimizing dissident social groups or actors.

The hypothesis will be tested by comparing the three-stage process described above with the actual coverage of the strike. The hypothesis will be supported to the extent that the predictions of editorial content can be found in the coverage. In addition, coverage which does not fit the model will be identified and analyzed as evidence against the hypothesis.

This analysis includes the headlines, news stories, editorials and columns of three newspapers: the New York *Times*; the Chicago *Tribune*; and the Atlanta *Constitution*. These papers were selected for their regional prominence, their geographic diversity and their availability to the researcher. These newspapers also represented a variation of editorial perspectives, from the mainstream Republicanism of the *Times* under publisher George Jones to the more outspoken Republican views of Joseph Medill at the *Tribune* and the solidly Democratic *Constitution* under the "new south" philosophy of Evan P. Howell. The study period is from July 16-30, 1877, the two-week period which encompassed most of the strike coverage.

Rising action: 1877 was a very bad year in a decade of bad years. Something seemed very wrong in America: unemployment was high, wages were low and living conditions were often deplorable (Bruce, pp. 9-27; Eggert, 1967, p. 24). The trainmen went on strike because of a ten percent pay cut, a cut the railroads said they were forced to make because of a declining economy. And the railroads were right: as powerful as they were, they remained helpless in a weakened economy. Even the government, under the influence of laissez faire politics, seemed powerless. The time was ripe for change--major changes in the social, political and economic structures of the nation.

The first stage of the strike coverage involved a news story which was

still developing. The newspapers, of course, could not know how the event would unfold. Thus each paper handled the story in a somewhat different manner. But in each case, the longer the strike continued, the more the story took on a life of its own. During this first phase, the ideological approach predicts moderately negative coverage which reveals some uncertainty about the handling of the story. Also important in the early coverage are the particular characteristics that the strike takes on because these characteristics are likely to be repeated and emphasized in the second and more powerful phase of the coverage.

The railroad strike began as a local event. It involved only the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and was confined first to Martinsburg and then Baltimore. Since it was not organized as a national strike, its advance from Martinsburg to other cities was not foreseen or controlled. The newspapers, for instance, provided no warning that a strike might be imminent. Even the Wheeling *Register*, a West Virginia newspaper which served Martinsburg, took small note of the B & O's wage reduction, announcing it in one sentence in a column of local trivia (Bruce, p. 73). The Chicago *Tribune*, for its part, included a regular column of railroad news in its issue of Sunday, July 15, the day before the strike began. Although the column discussed the bankruptcy and other financial problems of several roads, it gave no hint of the troubles to come. In fact, it wasn't until Wednesday, July 18, two days after the strike began, that the strike story made the *Tribune* at all, and then it was relegated to page five. At the *Tribune*, the story didn't make page one until July 21, five days after the strike started.

If the story was underplayed at the *Tribune*, it was quickly recognized as important news in the *Times*. On Tuesday, July 17, the day after the first Martinsburg confrontation, the Times ran a page one story on the B &

0 strikers. The main headline was neutral: "Railroad Employees On A Strike." But the second headline betrayed the paper's bias: "Foolish Fireman and Brakeman on the Baltimore & Ohio Road--Cause of the Trouble."

If the *Times* headline was not entirely unbiased, the paper gets better marks for explaining the reasons for the strike. The paper tied the strike to the new pay cut and included a short discussion of railroad wages. The story was also free from sensation, although it seemed to anticipate violence by pointing out that "considerable excitement exists" along the B & O.

The *Times* made its editorial position clear the following day. "It is difficult to conceive of a more unjustifiable and unreasonable strike than that which has assumed such formidable proportions at Martinsburg . . . ." The editorial went on to defend the railroad and explain that depressed stock prices forced the company's hand. Moreover, the *Times* claimed that wages were still acceptable since strikebreakers had already begun applying for the strikers' jobs. The strikers, the paper concluded, were "men too ignorant or too reckless to understand their own interests."

Thus the strike story emerged in the *Times* as serious but not sensational. The *Times* made clear its editorial opposition to the strike but it did not use its news columns to inflame the situation. Even as violence and threats of violence escalated, the *Times* was reserved, its language understated. This was the lead sentence of its strike story on July 20: "The situation with regard to the strike on the B & O Railroad is changed for the better, but the possibilities of trouble are not yet entirely averted." Both in language and tone, the *Times* took a low-key, high-minded approach to the story.

A contrasting treatment of the strike appeared in the pages of the Atlanta *Constitution* The paper's first mention of the strike was July 18

when five brief stories were published on page one under the headline "The War of Work." Two things are notable about this report. First, it was clearly more inflammatory than the *Times* Under the main headline, the subheads referred to the "Mob," the "Rioters," and the "Desperate Strikers." One story referred to strikers who were "frantic with rage." And with a clear bow to the doctrine of law and order, the newspaper reported that the militia has been called out "to control the railroad strike" and "to enforce the law."

But what was more remarkable in the *Constitution's* reports was the lack of explanation. Although one of the headlines mentioned a wage reduction, this was the only clue as to the cause of the strike. The copy itself offered no hint about the amount of the wage reduction or the demands of the strikers. The railroad's position was also absent. The piece was so stark, in fact, that it raised more questions than it answered. For instance, the story included this statement: "The military under command of Colonel Faulkner, sympathizing with the strikers, have withdrawn." Yet the meaning of this withdrawal was unclear. Did it mean that the strikers were justified? If so, why? Or was Colonel Faulkner incompetent? The answers were not found in this story. Nor were they found the following day, when the paper ran another series of dispatches from Baltimore and Martinsburg. These stories provided details about the confrontations between strikers and troops but they offered no explanation or context for the strike itself.

What is clear, then, even from the first day of the *Constitution's* coverage of the strike, was the anti-strike bias in the news coverage. The inflammatory language itself was an implicit form of censure and the references to law and order demonstrated the news bias toward the status quo. By the same token, the lack of coverage from the striker's point of

view revealed their lack of standing both in the press and in the society at large.

This became even more explicit the following day (July 19) when the *Constitution's* editorial writers took the railroad's side in the dispute. In so doing, they also discussed that pay cut, an important detail not previously discussed in the news columns. The Baltimore & Ohio, the paper noted, is one of the greatest railroads in the nation. "But great and successful as [B & O] President Garrett has heretofore been, he could not make his road superior to the changes ushered in by the panic of 1873." This was accurate enough, for most railroads were suffering financial reverses as a result of 1873. But the paper's reasoning also shifted the blame for the pay cut from the railroad to problems within the American economy. In other words, the pay cut wasn't the railroad's fault and, what's more, the railroad was helpless to anything about the national economy. The editorial also made a prediction about the outcome of the strike: "This strike will end, as strikes usually do, in entailing severe losses on the strikers." The strikers could do what they would, the paper made clear, but they could not expect the railroad to give up what it did not have. Nor could the strikers expect much sympathy from the Atlanta *Constitution*

Dramatic climax: The second stage of strike coverage began July 21 or 22. The shift from stage one to stage two was caused by the continuing spread of the strike across the nation and by the violence which accompanied that spread. The events in Pittsburg were especially violent and the papers responded by putting Pittsburg on page one. By all accounts, the threat of the strike had increased. According to the ideological frame, the press should respond by increasing its hostility to labor and delegitimizing the strike as it becomes a greater threat to the social system.

In Atlanta, the main headline July 22 was "The Laborer's War." Another deck stated: "Pittsburg in the hands of armed men." This was more or less the same type of language used early in the strike coverage. But it was on the *Constitution's* editorial page that the strike story took on a different cast. The paper now made a distinction between types of railroad employees. The strike, the paper said, "is confined to the more unskilled portion of the employees--the firemen and brakemen of freight trains. No other class of employees has joined the strike thus far." In other words, there were now two kinds of trainmen: the unskilled, who were irresponsible and prone to violence, and the skilled, who had the good sense to avoid trouble and act like gentlemen. There was little doubt about the newspaper's preference. Significantly, no similar distinction was made during the first days of the strike. It is also worth noting that the journalistic separation of the trainmen into "good" and "bad" in stage two became a continuing theme of the strike coverage.

By July 24, the news was more sensational than ever because the facts were more sensational. With the eruption of the riot in Pittsburg, the *Constitution* published several columns on the conditions there. It was not a time for subtlety. The main headline fairly screamed: "Torch and Bludgeon." Under it were nine additional decks, each telling of another horror: "Pittsburg A Sheet of Flame and Pillage Running Rampant," "Over $2,000,000 Worth of Public Buildings Laid in Ashes," and "The Troops Defiled and Resisted, and a Reign of Terror Inaugurated." The story itself was composed of short dispatches on the rioting crowds, the army's attempts to quell them, as well as the fires, the looting, and so on. The division between good and bad surfaced in the story too. Here the division was not between classes of trainmen but between trainmen and others: "... [I]t was noticeable that but few of the railroad employees were

engaged in the work of destruction." The story added that "generally the ringleaders were men who had never been employed by the railroad. Many half grown boys were foremost in the work of devastation." How the reporter discovered which rioters worked for the railroad was not made clear. Nevertheless, this separation of strikers further served to focus the story on violence and destruction while obscuring the political and economic issues which precipitated the strike. Such reporting was consistent with the ideological hypothesis.

One other story on the same page further emphasized the good-bad division of the strikers. The story reported on the reaction to the strike in Washington: "The dominant idea in executive circles seems to be that the control of the strike has passed into the hands of thieves and incendiaries." Not surprisingly, the government and the press agreed on this point, another finding consistent with the ideological approach.

For its part, the *Tribune* also raised the pitch of its coverage. On July 18, early in its strike coverage, the *Tribune* headlined its story "Riotous Strikers" and ran it on page five. But by July 21, the strike story had moved to page one and the main headline read "Bloodshed." Clearly, the *Tribune* was responding to the increased seriousness it perceived in the strike. The paper's main headline on July 22 was "The Wrong Track." Under it was this explanatory deck: "That was the One on Which the Pittsburg Strikers Ran Yesterday." The third deck read: "The Mob Made a Ferocious Attack on the Militia, and Fled Howling, Leaving Fourteen Dead on the Field." The accompanying story told of the confrontation between the rock-throwing crowd and 2,000 Black Hussars from Philadelphia. When some of the crowd started shooting, the Hussars opened fire on the crowd. After the smoke cleared, fourteen civilians were dead, including three women and two small children. What is curious about this coverage is its

lack of sympathy for the civilians. The story does not raise any questions about the deaths of women and children, nor does it compare the fourteen civilian deaths with the number of dead soldiers (three). In fact, the coverage seems to support the soldiers, not the citizens. For example, the July 22 dispatches point out that the Philadephia troops in the roundhouse were surrounded by "at least 10,000 infuriated men." And then the story made this comment:

> It is feared that not one of the soldiers will escape. An attack on them is now being planned. The streets are swarming with people. There will no doubt be bloody work soon.

The concern here was for the soldiers; there was no comparable concern for the citizens of Pittsburg. In addition, the "it is feared" phrase of the first sentence was curious. Who feared for the soldiers? "It is feared" seems to represent a force opposed to the aims of the strikers, perhaps government authority, perhaps the press itself. In any case, a close reading of *Tribune* stories reveals little sympathy for the strikers.

The high level of rhetoric continued the following day (July 23). The main *Tribune* headline was a label, but it wasn't a reassuring one: "Civil War" the paper shouted. Under this label were 17 additional decks, each with a startling fact about the Pittsburg riot. As might be expected, the language was inflammatory and anti-strike. A few examples illustrate the point: "The Horrid Social Convulsion of the Past Two Days;" "Deliberate Destruction of Five Millions of Railroad Property;" and "The Strong and Mighty Arm of Authority Palsied for Hours." Each of these heads implied certain values; each can be read as an attack on the strikers and as support for the status quo.

In fact, the whole notion of a labor strike was obscured during this stage of the news coverage. Pittsburg provided something more than a

strike of railroad men. Violence, not the *cause* of violence, became the news. In this way, the practice of defining news as violence shaped the news content of the paper. If the strike had been peaceful, in other words, it would not have been page one news. In addition, news about a peaceful strike might have had a different content; without violence as a theme, the news might have included substantive information about the wage scale of the trainmen or the economic troubles of the railroads.

The July 23 *Tribune* also carried a somewhat unexpected story on the strike. Under the headline, "A Concession," the paper noted that the Fort Wayne Railroad had given in to the strikers' demands and that wages would be restored to the previous level. In one case, at least, the strikers had won! At first blush, the publication of this story runs counter to the ideological approach. At the height of the strike, according to the ideological approach, the papers will discredit the strikers. How, then, can a positive story appear?

The answer is simple. In the first place, the ideological approach does not exclude telling the truth. Nor does it exclude "objective" reporting--telling two sides of the story. What objectivity and the ideological approach do exclude are fundamental challenges to the social and economic structure. The fact that the strikers might win a few battles is good, therefore, because they are always assured of losing the war. In addition, this particular story emphasized the fact that the strikers were "now getting rolling-stock in shape for the resumption of business tomorrow." In other words, ending the strike--even at the cost of higher wages--helped perpetuate the status quo.

The *Times* did not differ much from the other two papers during the height of the railroad strike. Like the *Constitution*, the *Times* pointed out in an editorial on July 24 that the riots were not really the fault of the

strikers but of the "idle and vicious class" of workers in American labor. The same day the *Times* ran a long editorial on the need for increased citizen protection from the unruly mob. The article is notable for its emphasis on the protection of property, an idea which is a cherished part of the capitalist ideology.

The news columns of the *Times* reflected a higher level of concern about violence on July 25. The usually staid *Times* ran this dramatic head on page one: "The Reign of Mob Law." The next deck worked to delegitimize the strike: "Thieves and Ruffians Still Leading the Strikers." The story itself was a compilation of news from around the nation and reported that some cities were troubled while others remained quiet.

All in all, the coverage during the height of the strike was consistent with the predictions of the ideological approach. News coverage during stage two was more dramatic than the stage one coverage, a reflection of the very real drama outside the newsroom. Inflammatory headlines and layer after layer of subheads reveal that the press was increasingly opposed to the violence associated with the strikes. Also, by the time the strikes reached their peak, editorial writers had discovered that strikers were different from looters. This may have improved the image of the strikers somewhat, though a comparison with looters and other hangers-on was hardly flattering. In any case, all of these techniques can be seen as functioning on behalf of the status quo. More than anything else, what is missing from the stage two coverage is any serious criticism of the American economic or political system.

Falling action: The final stage of the strike coverage began about July 26. By this time, the strike had ended in many cities and was clearly on its last legs elsewhere. The ideological prediction is that the press will see the strike as less threatening and will, therefore, accord it a more

favorable accounting relative to coverage in the second phase. That is, with the most serious danger of the strike now gone, the press will have no compelling motive for continuing to attack the strikers.

News coverage did seem to follow this pattern. On July 26, for example, the *Times* ran a now-familiar style of headline: "The War on the Railroads." But the story that ran under it told a less powerful tale. It began, "No new features of especial interest were developed in the great railroad strikes yesterday . . . ." A second strike story on page one recorded the end of the strike on the Erie Railroad. The Erie trainmen decided to return to work at reduced wages and the company agreed to take them back. Clearly, such news was bound to lower the level of rhetoric in the newspapers, a result which is consistent with the ideological hypothesis.

But on the editorial pages, the calm did not return so quickly. The *Tribune*, for instance, found plenty of targets for its July 26 editorials. Not surprisingly, one *Tribune* editorial noted the different classes of strikers. Instead of simply "good" and "bad" strikers, the *Tribune* now found three groups: the legitimate strikers, who were the best of the lot; the so-called strikers, who were identified as ordinary workers who just wanted to be left alone; and the mob, a group composed of "loafers, gutter-snipes, Communists, and destructionists." In fact, the discovery of communist strikers was a major theme of the *Tribune's* July 26 editorial page. The communists were mentioned in four separate editorials that day, always in negative terms. Such editorial page hostility was not predicted by the ideological approach and, in fact, it runs counter to the suggestion that the decreasing level of violence would be treated in the press as a decreasing threat to the society.

But the browbeating of the Chicago communists may have been functional within the ideological frame. Because they were politically

deviant and outside the mainstream of American political ideology, the communists are easily turned into scapegoats for society. Their presence alone helps the press explain the violence and lawlessness of the strike. The *Tribune* serves the status quo, then, by singling out the communists for special abuse. Viewed in this way, the increased editorial hostility at this stage of the coverage further confirms the role of the press as an instrument of social control.

On July 28, the *Tribune* again looked for lessons from the strike. At this point the paper weighed in with its most thoughtful criticism to date, reviewing the economy and the national mood. Among other things, the paper advocated a larger army as a way of suppressing domestic violence. The paper also criticized Chicago's mayor for not acting more swiftly against the strikers. The high cost of the strike was also considered, as were the United Workingmen of St. Louis, for whom the *Tribune* had only scorn. In addition, the newspaper made a more thoughtful review of the economic troubles of the nation, one of the few *Tribune* stories of the strike which looked at the deeper causes of the railroad's economic problems. In short, the *Tribune's* editorial page was solidly anti-labor in the final stages of the strike. In so doing, it also functioned in a way which served the interests of the status quo.

For its part, the *Constitution* took up the banner of regionalism. On July 29, its editorial page noted with pride that the strikes and riots were confined to northern communities. It also took a swipe at "northern communists" who, the paper claimed, "were sent into all of the southern cities to poison the minds of the workingmen and produce disorder, but their errand was a bootless one. The people of the south are law-abiding . . . ." Like the *Tribune*, the *Constitution* put great stock in the rule the law, at least when speaking of strikers.

Finally, it is significant that during the waning days of the strike, the papers began to reflect on the more serious issues of the strike. As predicted by the ideological frame, very little serious economic commentary or analysis appeared in the first two stages of the strike coverage. After July 26, the papers began to deepen their discussion. The *Times*, for example, ran a June 28 editorial entitled "The Lessons of the Week." This piece is interesting for its more or less favorable treatment of labor. The *Times* stopped short of endorsing trade unions, but the paper was able discuss problems of labor and capital in a rational voice, unlike the *Constitution* and, on most occasions, the *Tribune*.

In sum, the news coverage in the third phase of the strike did fall within the bounds predicted by the hypothesis. But the editorial coverage remained a mixed case, with some columns reflecting on the serious issues and some looking for scapegoats. In the larger ideological frame, both types of editorial columns functioned on behalf of the status quo.

Conclusion: Several generalizations can be made about the news coverage of the 1877 strike. As documented above, the three newspapers generally follow the path predicted by the ideological hypothesis. The analysis of their coverage shows that the papers did increase their hostility to the strike as the strike became a greater threat to the social system. This supports the hypothesis and confirms the assertion that these newspapers, as active participants in the economic system, were not free to undermine that system.

In fact, these three newspapers played the opposite role in 1877: they consistently supported the exisiting system. The trainmen did not receive a full and open hearing of their grievances in the pages of these papers. Thus coverage of the strike was negative from the beginning, even before the strike reached its climax in Pittsburg.

The violence at Pittsburg brought other forces into play. The papers took a strong and consistent stand against violence and in favor of authority. Their news columns promoted the official point of view and they used both their news columns and their editorial pages to separate the "good" strikers from the "bad." Such actions tended to increase the level of rhetoric in the press during the most dramatic part of the strike, just as the ideological approached predicted. Although an occasional "positive" story about the strike appeared, such stories never questioned the status quo or seriously questioned the economic order.

The third phase of the coverage also conformed to the ideological frame. As the strike lost strength on the streets, the level of rhetoric in the papers also decreased. But this was not true on the editorial pages, where journalists continued to attack communists, looters, and others who had presumably caused all the violence and disruption. These editorial page attacks were not predicted. Nonetheless, such attacks enabled the press to explain the most threatening parts of the strike by blaming it all on the most dangerous elements within the labor force. In this way, such coverage also operated within the ideological frame.

It is not surprising that these three newspapers were largely anti-labor in 1877. After all, times were hard and unemployment was high. Radicals had a large and receptive audience for their ideas. Naturally, editors and publishers tended to analyze events from their own point of view. Thus they saw the strike as an attack on an economic system that was serving them well.

But the anti-labor views of the publishers are not sufficient to explain the three-phase pattern of news coverage described above. What is new in this analysis is the finding that the press increased its level of anti-labor rhetoric in response to the perceived threat of the strike. In this way, all

three newspapers responded within an ideological frame, defending the capitalist system and using the conventions of objective reporting to delegitimize the strike. The ideological frame also helps explain why there was so little difference in coverage between the Republican *Times* and *Tribune* and the Democratic *Constitution*. In the face of a serious threat, political and regional differences tended to blur.

It must be pointed out, however, that this analysis is limited to three newspapers and may not be generalizable to other American newspapers. Certainly these three newspapers are mainstream publications and do not represent extremes in either politics or economics. To this extent, alternative patterns of strike coverage were not included here and remain to be studied.

Nevertheless, the three papers examined here were important regional newspapers. More importantly, the very fact that these newspapers were mainstream tends to make them similar to other middle-of-the-road publications. And to the extent that the *Times*, the *Tribune* and the *Constitution* represented a large number of mainstream newspapers in the 1870s, the ideological frame gains additional support.

Finally, a significant aspect of these findings is their obvious similarity to more recent patterns of media coverage. Gitlin (1980), for example, developed twelve "framing devices" used by the media in their coverage of the New Left during the 1960s. Despite great differences in the social and political issues of the day as well as vast changes in media technology, five of these techniques are identical to those used in 1877. Gitlin wrote about the media's tendency toward (1) "marginalization (showing demonstrators to be deviant or unrepresentative): "(2) "disparagement of the movement's effectiveness;" (3) "reliance on statements by government officials and other authorities;" (4) "emphasis

on the presence of Communists;" and, last but not least, (5) "emphasis on violence in demonstrations" (pp.28-29). As documented above, these characteristics were prominent in coverage of the great railroad strike. Thus what Gitlin documented in the 1960s was hardly new. Although American life changed dramatically between 1877 and the 1960s, the ideological frame through which journalists made sense of a crisis situation remained remarkably similar. A deeply ingrained ideology of journalism--particularly the values associated with capitalism and reinforced through objectivity--may very well explain this consistency.

It is also important to point out the narrow ideological boundaries of the coverage reviewed in this study. As noted earlier, the range of issues open for political discussion in this country is exceedingly narrow. One of the most distressing findings of this research is the documentation of this narrow spectrum in the nineteenth century. And unfortunately for American journalism--as well as America--the situation has not improved much in the twentieth century.

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